

The last word Support Julia Lesage

by John Hess and Chuck Kleinhans

from *Jump Cut*, no. 16, 1977, pp. 38-39

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1977, 2005

In our last issue we ran an article about the firing of Julia Lesage from the English department at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle campus. The main official justification for the dismissal was unsatisfactory scholarship. That claim has been convincingly refuted over the summer by dozens of letters from film specialists here and abroad attesting to the high level of professional achievement found in Lesage's feminist and Marxist writings on film and literature. A list of the senders of over seventy letters affirming the validity and importance of her work reads like a who's who in current film scholarship. In addition to individuals, the Film Studies Association of Canada (with over 100 members) sent a letter of support, as did the editorial board of *Screen* and members of the board of the Society for Education in Film and Television (England). Added together these letters prove that the official explanation is phony. Her work is consistently described as excellent by film specialists, yet the English department and Circle Campus administration repeatedly refuse to change their decision.

There's only one reasonable conclusion: this is a political firing. A feminist and Marxist activist is being run out of the university, not for her scholarship but for her politics. It's not as crudely done as it was during the anti-communist hysteria of the Cold War, but it's the same game. While proclaiming itself as a center of liberal and humanist values, the university actually acts to repress free speech and dissent under the totally sham guise of enforcing professional standards. Lesage has been openly Marxist and feminist in her writing, her teaching, and her political activity on and off campus. This is the real reason she is being fired. Julia Lesage's fight is our fight. The task of developing a revolutionary film culture can seem rather tame when seen as the completion of another film or another issue of JUMP CUT. But it also takes clear-cut institutional forms as well, and the fight to keep Lesage's

job is such a struggle. In an earlier [editorial on Marxist film criticism \(JUMP CUT 8\)](#), we pointed out,

"The resources, the institutions of film criticism, are by and large constructed to screen out everything but what is already accepted, already being done."

"Fashion appears in the guise of change. The wholly and partially government subsidized film magazines, the commercial outlets for reviews, the film conferences, scholarships, jobs, research money, in fact the whole apparatus serves to preserve the status quo. Interestingly, while Marxism is excluded from this system, sexism, racism, and elitism are welcome."

The fight for Julia Lesage's job involves all of us who are working to build a liberating film culture. What can you do? Right now the focal point of the fight is on campus with the student Justice for Julia committee exposing the administration's false justifications and pushing for reinstatement. But support from everyone concerned — teachers and students, filmmakers, cultural workers, feminists, and radicals — keeps the pressure on and shows that the issues won't just go away as the reactionaries hope. Letters of support are still important. Address them to: Chancellor Donald Riddle, 2833 University Hall, UICC, Chicago IL 60680, with copies to: Norman Cantor, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, 2703 University Hall, UICC; Dean Elmer Hadley, Liberal Arts and Sciences, 350 University Hall, UICC; and Julia Lesage, English, 2221 University Hall, UICC.

In the campus struggles of the 60s we learned the truth about university complicity in imperialist war and domestic repression. The firing of Julia Lesage shows once again that universities will respect democratic rights of free speech and inquiry only when they are forced to do so. The bankrupt liberals of the UICC administration and English department fired Lesage for reasons which have been proven patently false. But they won't change their decision simply when the facts prove them wrong because the issue is not professional standards but political power. Fighting back is the only way we can win. Join the struggle!